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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001469

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: IS SLEIMAN THE ACE UP BERRI'S SLEEVE?

REF: A. BEIRUT 1461

1B. BEIRUT 1456

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri has again gone on the offensive, this time postponing parliament's presidential election for one month to allow time for March 14 and March 8 to reach a consensus candidate. In a move in which Phalange party leader Amine Gemayel appears to be the unwitting accomplice, Berri has essentially removed the risk of March 14 electing its own candidate by absolute majority and bought enough time to unleash a scenario in which Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Sleiman emerges as the winner. End summary.

GHANEM ASSASSINATION CHANGES BERRI'S MOOD

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and his advisor, Ali Hamdan, at Berri's office in Ain al-Tineh on September 24 at the Speaker's request. The Ambassador took advantage of the visit to express his condolences for the September 19 assassination of March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem.

13. (C) Berri said immediately before the attack he was optimistic for the first time on reaching a consensus presidential candidate. The September 19 Bishops' statement (septel) cited his initiative by name, Saudi King Abdullah had told PM Siniora to work with Berri, French PM Kouchner and other Europeans were on board, and Berri and Future Movement leader Saad Hariri had just scheduled a meeting for September 21, a meeting that was subsequently canceled following the assassination. Even Saudi Arabia rejected March 14's (non-consensus) candidate, Nassib Lahoud, despite Lahoud's relationship to King Abdullah (Lahoud's sister-in-law was once married to the King). Only the US opposed the initiative, he said accusingly.

BERRI POSTPONES VOTE

¶4. (C) Taking a moment to sing Ghanem's praises, Berri said the former MP was one of the best parliamentarians, a good lawyer and speaker who never said a bad word about anyone, a decent man from a modest background trying to earn a living to support his family. "They" (those responsible for the attack) don't want a stable Lebanon, he said. The assassination killed his initiative to find a consensus candidate just as it was beginning to bear fruit and they were on the verge of discussing names, he complained.

¶5. (C) As a result, he decided a cooling off period was necessary to allow the two sides more time to talk about consensus candidates. After a September 22 meeting with Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, Berri decided to wait until October 17 before convening parliament. (Note: Papers cite Ramadan as the reason for the postponement. Parliament resorts to a legislative vice electoral body on October 16. MPs are scheduled to gather in the parliament today, but no one is expecting a formal convening of an electoral session after the Gemayel-Berri meeting. End note.)

#### A DEADLY GAME OF NUMBERS

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¶6. (C) Berri rejected the Ambassador's accusation that "they" were intent on killing off March 14, if not politically than literally. Ghanem's death did not affect March 14's absolute majority, as commonly believed, he explained, since the absolute majority is based on the number of living parliamentarians, not total seats. The number now needed to win was 64 instead of 65. Even without (Tripoli bloc) Mohamed Safadi, March 14 still had an absolute majority, he claimed; March 14 lost nothing in terms of voting, but gained a great deal in terms of public sympathy, he argued. (Note: Safadi, as well as March 14 MP Boutros Harb, insist on a two-thirds quorum, catering to March's 8 position. End note.)

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¶7. (C) The Ambassador noted that this seemed to echo the outrageous remarks made by Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun (Note: Aoun essentially accused March 14 of staging the attack to further its own political ends). No, no, Berri exclaimed, protesting what the General said vigorously. Let's find a consensus president now to stop the killing, he pleaded.

#### PRESIDENT IS PANACEA

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¶8. (C) The Ambassador, noting he was not questioning the Speaker's sincerity, commented that the election of a consensus president might solve the immediate political crisis but only delayed the inevitable confrontation over formation of the new cabinet. Berri disagreed, stating the presidency was the "sortie" or way out of Lebanon's political impasse. A candidate who enjoyed the consensus of both sides would be by definition the strongest candidate, Berri argued, suggesting Amine Gemayel as a possibility. To prove his point, Berri cited several historical examples of weak non-consensus presidents and one strong consensus president (Fouad Shehab).

¶9. (C) He personally favored his "friend" Jean Obeid, but Obeid, alas, was no friend of Hizballah's and had zero hope for securing March 14's support. The Syrians opposed him more than even March 14, he claimed. Berri admitted it would be difficult to get Aoun, with 20 MPs in parliament, "off the presidency," adding that he had told Hizballah that, like Obeid, Aoun would never get March 14's consent.

#### NEW GOVERNMENT WILL BE TERRIBLE

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¶10. (C) The Ambassador started to ask about Lebanese Armed

Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman, but was interrupted by the Speaker. First governments are always "terrible," as the new president tries to impose his will on cabinet formation, Berri said. Even that "jackass" Lahoud had tried to force Berri to accept a technocrat government, which the Speaker, as Amal president, refused to allow without the consent of then-outgoing Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. (Note: The first cabinet after Lahoud took office was headed by "technocrat" Salim Hoss, as Lahoud's political attempt to sideline Hariri. End note.) The average lifespan of a given government is one and a half years, he said, dismissing the Ambassador's concerns about the next cabinet.

¶11. (C) The new government will have a lot on its plate, Berri continued, including Paris III reforms, UNSCRS 1701 and 1559, continuing the national dialogue, especially regarding Hizballah's "resistance," a new electoral law (Hamdan piped in), etc. He would publicly cite these issues as priorities for the new government. Asked by the Ambassador whether it would respect the decisions of the Siniora government, Berri said it would be up to the new president and new government, but he believed they would leave them all, including the decision to create the Special Tribunal, untouched.

A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

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¶12. (C) Berri urged the US to echo Saad Hariri's call for "semi-consensus." Saudi Arabia was being the most helpful, he claimed, noting Saudi Ambassador Khoja (who is back in Lebanon after frequent absences due to security threats against him) offered his help to Amal MP Ali Hassan Khalil in a recent meeting. (Note: Khalil, who makes frequent trips to Damascus, is Amal's principal interlocutor with Syrian. We wonder if he was trying to promote some sort of Syria-Saudi Arabia reconciliation. End note.) A little help from the US was needed to convince Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea of the need for consensus (Berri reportedly told Jumblatt in a September 21 phone call that he did not want a president who was against the Druse leader, Hariri, or Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir).

¶13. (C) Never one to miss an opportunity for theatrics, Berri abruptly left the room at one point and came back with enlarged copies of old French L'Orient le Jour newspapers

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from previous elections with headlines screaming about debates over quorum. Even when MPs had met outside of parliament, he said, pointing to a headline from the 1982 election, they have always waited for a quorum before voting.

¶14. (C) The Ambassador noted that March 14 members made positive noises about Berri's initiative for a consensus candidate, but rejected the mandatory two-thirds quorum. And if they don't succeed? Berri asked rhetorically, launching into the overplayed refrain of how March 14 won't negotiate if it believes it will get its own way in the end, with US support. They're the ones creating problems, he said; you should put them on your visa ban. We're not imposing conditions on them, we're applying the constitution. Referring to his August 31 speech in which he announced his initiative, Berri said it was a purely Lebanese initiative, with no Saudi, French, US, Syrian or other input.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO SLEIMAN?

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¶15. (C) Hamdan reminded the Ambassador that he had started to say something about Sleiman, to which the Ambassador asked whether Berri was trying to suggest that he was the only realistic candidate. Berri skirted the question, complaining instead that the Ambassador was telling everyone in town that Berri had given him the names of four candidates when all

they were doing was discussing potential names. Berri then added two names to the list that have been resurfacing of late: Pierre Dakesh and former Finance Minister (in the 2005 Mikati cabinet) Demianos Kattar.

¶16. (C) The Speaker did note, however, that he had heard contradicting US statements about a constitutional amendment, which would be needed to elect Sleiman. If the US opposed, he would like to know. The Ambassador explained that, based on Lebanon's recent history, a constitutional amendment did not seem like the best choice. However, if that was what the Lebanese decide to do, ultimately it was up to them. Our advice is no, you have no need to move in that direction, but we will not veto it, he said.

¶17. (C) Amending the constitution would allow us to broaden the list of candidates, Berri persisted, noting that some on the list, like his friend Obeid, were automatically disqualified. Overcoming the Patriarch's objection to a constitutional amendment would not be easy, however. (Note: Shortly after the meeting, we learned Berri had gone to see the Patriarch. End note.) Berri denied, however, that Sleiman was the eventual candidate of choice, claiming March 8 would first meet with March 14 to ask its opinion.

COMMENT

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¶18. (C) In this never-ending game of chess, the crafty Speaker is always planning several moves ahead. We had barely had time to digest Berri's proposal for a one-month trial period when he already has made his next move. Berri shamelessly took advantage of the assassination of Antoine Ghanem (a Phalange party member) and his condolence call on Phalange party leader Amine Gemayel to strike a deal to postpone the vote for a month, after which Gemayel believes he would emerge as the consensus candidate. Gemayel, blinded by what he sees as his own increased prospects following the murder of one of his rank and file (he sounded very presidential in our September 20 meeting with him, Ref B), took the bait, though we are not betting on seeing him in Baabda Palace any time soon.

¶19. (C) With voting now postponed, March 8 can relax for the next few weeks and patiently wait for the critical October 16 date, when parliament resumes its legislative role. It can then pursue the strategy we described in Ref A, amending the constitution to allow Sleiman to become president. Hence Hamdan's keen interest in our views on Sleiman and the Speaker's on amending the constitution.

¶20. (C) If, on the other hand (adopting for a moment Berri's own way of thinking), March 8's strategy is to intentionally designed to make us believe a Sleiman presidency is the real objective, and we don't object, a constitutional amendment

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permitting Sleiman's candidacy also opens the door for another potential March 8 candidate, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh. We remind our loyal readers that it was the Speaker himself, whose moves are never unintentional, who clued us in on the importance of the October 16 date.

¶21. (C) But perhaps we are giving Berri too much credit. A Sleiman president, especially one limited to two years, does have the added advantage of pacifying Aoun by opening the door for his candidacy in 2009. Not being as crafty as Berri, our best assessment remains that Sleiman is indeed the king March 8 hopes remains standing at the end of this game.

FELTMAN